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INTRODUCTION

Blue Labour and the Politics of the Common Good

Adrian Pabst

WHY BLUE LABOUR?

Since Labour's General Election defeat in May 2010 – their second-worst electoral result in over 70 years – there have been numerous attempts to rethink the Labour tradition. None has been more controversial and more significant than the movement known as 'Blue Labour'. Far beyond any other group, Blue Labour has questioned the current consensus at the heart of the Labour Party and British politics – the fusion of social with economic liberalisation under the joint aegis of the central bureaucratic state and the global 'free market'. The secular ideology that underlies this fusion promotes little more than freedom of choice, utility and short-term pleasure. Against this ideology, and its explicit or tacit support for both market commodification and state domination, Blue Labour argues for a new consensus – a politics of the common good that recognises the legitimacy of estranged interests and brings about a negotiated solution to conflict through civic institutions that promote virtue rather than vice. The aim is to shift the focus away from narrow self-interest and greed towards shared benefit and mutual flourishing. This essay collection provides a restatement of Blue Labour thinking from its key protagonists and from a number of new voices, including senior politicians, leading academics and activists, as well as influential commentators.

In the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis and the worst recession since the Great Depression of 1929–32, Britain has

witnessed one of the most turbulent eras in politics since the Second World War. The Union is under threat from the forces of technocracy in both London and Brussels, as well as from a growing popular backlash that fuels support for populist parties such as UKIP or the SNP. In response, the three main parties in Westminster defend a politics that oscillates between the controlling centre and the controlled individuals so beloved of unadulterated liberalism. Faced with a twin crisis of identity and inequality, the failure of the 1945 and 1979 settlements is plain for everyone to see: neither nationalisation nor privatisation has delivered general prosperity and human flourishing. By contrast, Blue Labour seeks to craft a new vision that is centred on reciprocity and solidarity – a more mutualist model in which both risk and profit are shared, reward is rejoined with responsibility and individual virtue is linked to public acknowledgement. Central to this new vision is the promotion of vocation and good ethos across all sectors of the economy, the polity and society, combined inseparably with the honouring of interpersonal relationships, of place and of faith.

THE BLUE LABOUR NARRATIVE

Blue Labour is a narrative about fall and redemption. It is about the death of an old social-democratic politics in Britain and across continental Europe, and the loss of millions of voters who have deserted the party. And it is about reconnecting with people as they are – as human beings who belong to families, localities and communities and who are embedded in shared traditions, interests and faiths. Neither as lone egos nor as anonymous mass, but as relational beings who desire mutual recognition more than wealth and power, to paraphrase Jon Cruddas. If Labour wants to reconnect with people, then it needs to revisit its own history and the history of the United Kingdom, rejecting amoral cynicism and reclaiming an ethics of virtue.

Blue Labour seeks to reimagine both Britain and the Labour tradition. In this respect it continues the struggle between two rival traditions of politics – one rationalist, utilitarian and transactional and the other romantic, principled and transformative. The former may have triumphed at crucial junctures and dominated the twentieth century, but it never caught the imagination of the people. Whether in the late 1930s, the late 1960s or after 1994, it was the

planners, managers and bureaucrats who won out over the visionaries and the creators. But now this cold rationalism is in crisis, and the tide is turning.

Blue Labour distinguishes itself from other forces within the wider Labour movement precisely on account of its commitment to a politics that is ethical, not materialistic. Its emphasis on the creativity of human labour, on the intrinsic importance of vocation and on the need to nurture virtuous action grows out of the British Romantic tradition embodied by William Morris. In his lecture on the legacy of the former Labour leader George Lansbury, Jon Cruddas tells this story as follows:

The mass political party of the twentieth century that George Lansbury led is gone. The cultures and social formations of the industrial working class that gave it life and sustained it have gone. More recently, social democracy has suffered a cultural devastation – almost if you like, a social death – and while the structures of our party survive the meanings that gave them life have not.

We are dwindling, and we have to change. We have to return to our exiled traditions and galvanise for the future. Indeed the One Nation tradition grows out of the moral outrage at the mechanisation of society. It begins with Carlyle's *The Condition of England* question in his essay on Chartism in 1839. His raging against the inhumanity of industrialisation gives first voice to the One Nation tradition: 'the condition of the great body of people in a country is the condition of the country itself'.

Out of it grows the social novels of Gaskell, Dickens, Disraeli's *Sybil* or *Two Nations*, and Ruskin. It is the tradition of an English modernity of virtue and sensibility and Morris was its greatest exponent. It was given form within the ILP and Labour through Hardie, MacDonald and Lansbury. It lay deep within Attlee and the texture of his great transformative government. It is captured in the character of Lansbury more than any other and saved the Party at its moment of acute crisis.

Politics is always first and foremost poetic because if it lacks the spirit to transform people and give them hope for a better life then it will fail to tackle the fundamental power relations that keep them in their place, however many policies it has lined

up. That's why to me Lansbury is so important, not just for what he stood for but for his failures and the lessons we can learn from his exemplary life.¹

It is against the background of this continual opposition between the transformative and the transactional that one has to understand Blue Labour's appeal to the radical tradition of British Romanticism – of William Cobbett, Walter Scott, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris, G. D. H. Cole and R. H. Tawney. There is in reality no simple continuum of British radicalism stretching from Magna Carta to the Peasants' Revolt and on to the Wars of the Roses and the sixteenth-century Commotion Time uprising – or 'from the Lollards to the Levellers and on to the Chartists and the suffragettes', as Dominic Sandbrook has rightly remarked.² Rather, the more specific Romantic tradition serves as a constant source of inspiration in the battle against those forces that are determined to abolish the history of both party and country in favour of abstract ideals such as progress and freedom of choice (as John Milbank and Dave Landrum argue in their contributions).

The invocation of Romanticism is vital because it highlights the paradoxical nature of Blue Labour³ – above all the idea that the old is the new because renewal requires the recovery of exiled traditions, as Maurice Glasman suggests in the opening chapter. Blue Labour's restoration of a Romantic vision explains its rejection of the utilitarian moralism and liberal economics that have characterised both the left and the right for so long, and the recovery of a 'moral economy' that promotes virtue and mutual flourishing even in an age of austerity – an argument developed by Jon Cruddas in his chapter.

The Romantic legacy also helps explain why the Labour Party and the wider Labour movement were not always on the side of progress against tradition. On the contrary, Labour used to be a socially and culturally conserving force that combined robust resistance to an overly facile and uncritical progressivism (represented by the Whig oligarchy) with a passionate defence of land, parish and work (inspired by Morris' Romantic realism). In fact, Labour's roots are much less to do with Victorian liberalism than with High Toryism and the cooperative movement. David Marquand makes this point in a review of Martin Pugh's *Speak for Britain! A New History of the Labour Party*:

Labour was not just the heir of liberalism and the Liberal Party. It also drew on a long line of working-class Toryism: a rollicking, rambunctious, fiercely patriotic and earthy tradition, at odds both with the preachy nonconformist conscience that saturated the culture of provincial liberalism and with the patronising, 'we-know-best' preconceptions of metropolitan intellectuals. Working-class Tories were against the 'lily-livered Methodists' excoriated by the arch-Tory socialist Robert Blatchford, whose *Merrie England* (1893) was perhaps the single most effective work of socialist propaganda published in Britain before the First World War.⁴

Marquand is right that Labour has always been conservative in this sense of a genuine popular rootedness and belief in the best of the British legacy (a theme that is expanded in different ways by Rowenna Davis and Ed West). Blue Labour seeks to recover and renew the radical conservatism that defines England and resonates strongly with cognate traditions across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Thus Blue Labour is so controversial and significant precisely because its appeal to the British Romantic tradition challenges party orthodoxy and transactional politics alike – notably the individualist, pro-secular, pro-capitalist and pro-metropolitan outlook that is so closely connected with the party's embrace of social and economic liberalism and the current consensus. By contrast, Blue Labour reminds both the party and the country of the origins of the Labour movement and its contribution to national renewal. The practice of virtues such as courage, justice, honour and integrity shaped the workers' movement in resisting the worst excesses of the Industrial Revolution and laissez-faire capitalism, as Karl Polanyi first argued in his seminal book *The Great Transformation*.⁵ His thought is at the heart of Blue Labour and runs through many of the essays in this collection.

Against the forces of the increasingly unfettered 'free market' and centralised state, workers set up burial societies to honour their dead and created cooperatives and mutuels to honour their communities and the places which they inhabited. They forged ties among Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, other Nonconformists, evangelicals and Jews that gave rise to an internationalist movement of patriots who celebrate their country, its culture and history. It was a profound sense of mutual obligation and a desire for reciprocal recognition that

gave rise to the tradition of solidarity and cooperation. In this way Labour grew out of popular movements of self-help and self-improvement, giving the voiceless a voice in the governance of the realm. It is this tradition that Frank Field invokes in his passionate plea for a new politics of the common good.

Such a legacy does not insinuate some form of reactionary nostalgia whose pessimism and fatalism is just as misguided as the idea of utopian progress, which underpins both state communism and market capitalism. That is why Blue Labour repudiates the old politics of both the secular left and the reactionary right, which are categories that were bequeathed to us by the French and the American revolutions. These two models are ultimately incompatible with Britain's unique legacy of a 'mixed constitution' which permits sovereign legitimacy to emerge at once from the popular will and from an objective sense of equity (underpinned by the Crown) and by reference to notions of eternal truth and goodness. Today the role of the established Church in guaranteeing this balance is consolidated by the contribution of other faith communities.

Thus Blue Labour marks a renewed resistance against the impersonal forces of liberalism that have disembedded the economy from society; re-embedded social relations in a transactional, economic and utilitarian culture; and disturbed through incomprehension our ancient constitution in a manner that threatens both civil liberty and democratic involvement.

BRITAIN'S POST-LIBERAL POLITICS AND THE BLUE LABOUR VISION

Blue Labour emerged as part of a wider 'post-liberal' turn in British politics in the wake of the 2008 economic crash and the 2011 London riots.⁶ A *New Statesman* editorial in March 2013 summarises this well:

Ever since the Thatcher era, British politics has been defined by forms of economic and social liberalism. The right won the argument for the former and the left the argument for the latter, or so it is said. Yet in the post-crash era, this ideological settlement is beginning to fracture. The right is re-examining its crude economic liberalism and the left its social liberalism. This shift is characterised neither by a revival of socialist economics,

nor by one of reactionary conservatism. Rather, it is defined by a mutual recognition that liberalism, at least in some of its guises, does not provide all the answers to Britain's most entrenched problems: its imbalanced economy, its atomised society, its lack of common identity.⁷

Two thinkers, Phillip Blond and Maurice Glasman, and their respective factions – the Red Tories and Blue Labour – were quicker to recognise this than most. Mr Blond may no longer have the ear of the Prime Minister, if he ever did, but since the appointment of Jon Cruddas as the head of Labour's policy review, the Blue Labour faction has emerged as the dominant intellectual influence on the Labour Party.

[...] With its emphasis on abstract individualism, liberalism, the great driver of social emancipation and economic prosperity, now feels inadequate to this new age of insecurity. In his recent 'Earning and Belonging' speech, Mr Cruddas said: 'Simply opposing the cuts without an alternative is no good. It fails to offer reasonable hope. The stakes are high because when hope is not reasonable despair becomes real'. He is right: the stakes could not be higher but who is best positioned to lead Britain out of despair and create a new sense of purpose and belonging?

Blue Labour seeks to rebuild hope and a sense of direction by returning to long-neglected issues of ethical principle and character. Far from being nostalgic or reactionary, it appeals to perennial principles of the common good, participation, association, individual virtue and public honour. The task is to renew their meaning and craft institutions that can translate them into transformative practices of mutual assistance and cooperation across the country, as the chapter by David Lammy suggests.

Contrary to New Labour, Blue Labour hopes to demonstrate how Labour's strong civic traditions can point to a renewal of the movement as it seeks to forge a politics that meets the demands of our time. Beyond false binary choices, Blue Labour encourages a more robust and fundamental debate about a whole range of controversial and emotive themes, including welfare (Frank Field), globalisation and migration (David Goodhart), meaningful work (Ruth Yeoman), nature, science and conservation movements (Ruth Davis) as well as the central importance of the family (Michael Merrick). The goal of

the essay collection is to develop Blue Labour thinking and help forge a new consensus around a vision of the common good. That vision is informed not only by Catholic Social Thought, certain Anglican strands and elements of the dissenting religious traditions and cognate strands in Judaism and Islam, but also by the deepest legacy of the cooperative and the trade union movement as well as the practice of community organising, as Arnie Graf's chapter so vividly illustrates.

What binds together all these traditions is the commitment to resist the dominance of utopian ideology and sectional interests in public life. Crucially, they share in common a concern with honouring 'conservative' dispositions to defend the best in local and cultural practices, resistance to the power of both market and state transactionism, affirmation of the love of place as well as the honouring of faith and institutional life. All these are elements of the Blue Labour instinct, and we aim to show that they are irrevocably part of Labour's political DNA.

As the quote from the *New Statesman* indicates, the ideology that shaped UK politics for much of the post-war period is now fractured. Together with other actors and movements, Blue Labour endeavours to develop a new vision that will enable people to flourish and build a common life by forming unexpected coalitions involving businesses, the churches and the trade unions – as Tom Watson suggests in his contribution. In this respect Blue Labour stands firmly in the tradition of the wider Labour movement whose very existence – forged from the turbulence of the Industrial Revolution – is a success story in itself. Amid the current crisis and social dislocation, Labour has once again a unique role to play in the civic, social and economic transformation of the UK.

This essay collection is not an alternative party manifesto. Instead, it aims to challenge Labour to rediscover its own best, exiled traditions as a source of renewal for the party and the country. It is part of an intellectual evolution rather than a fixed position. Blue Labour is trying to sketch a new direction for the whole Labour movement but it has much further to go.

For this reason, Blue Labour is neither a repackaged offering of 'Old Labour' nor the latest manifestation of 'New Labour'. These are false dichotomies that privilege the status quo and bracket key ideas from the wider debate within the Labour Party, the Labour movement and British society. Nor is it but a gloomy diagnosis of the Blair and

Brown years, despite the vital reckoning that is required in relation to their legacy. It rather seeks to question some of the structural features of the Labour Party that have been barely queried over the past 70 years – rationalist planning, centralism and a progressive embrace of secular ideology.

But it asks questions of some of the key elements of Labour's history not in order to discredit the past but to shape the present and future. In an intervention in August 2013, Maurice Glasman put it as follows:

Only Labour has the traditions and values that can serve the country at this time of need. Yet the current Labour leadership seems to need reminding of these traditions and values. We forget at our peril that it was the Labour movement that built the burial societies so that the poor would not be abandoned to a pauper's grave. People clubbed together and founded building societies and mutual societies so that misfortune did not turn into catastrophe. Our values were respectability, loyalty, courage and, above all, work. Labour. We cared about it so much we named our party after it. These are the values we need now to rebuild trust and renew a sense of virtue and vocation in the economy and in politics. The Labour Party's future lies in reclaiming its inheritance. Our tradition is our future.⁸

Labour's 2010 General Election defeat demands a wholesale transformation of the party, not just some tinkering at the margins. Both in terms of ideas and organisation, Labour needs to change in line with its own best traditions – the workers' and cooperative movements and the manifold mutual arrangements with which they built a fairer Britain following the ravages of the agricultural enclosures, of the Industrial Revolution and of laissez-faire capitalism. Blue Labour seeks to renew and extend these traditions in order to envisage a more associationist possibility for this country's future, in both domestic and international terms.

It is in this spirit of renewal and transformation, peculiar to the Labour tradition, that we offer these essays as a contribution to the debate.

NOTES

1. Jon Cruddas, 'George Lansbury memorial lecture', Queen Mary, University of London, 7 November 2013. Available at <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/11/jon-cruddas-george-lansbury-memorial-lecture-full-text> (accessed on 25 August 2014).
2. Dominic Sandbrook, 'Family, faith and flag', *New Statesman*, 7 April 2011. Available at <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2011/04/labour-party-english-england> (accessed on 25 August 2014).
3. Maurice Glasman, Jonathan Rutherford, Marc Stears and Stuart White (eds), *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox: The Oxford London Seminars 2010–11*, intro. Ed Miliband (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2011). Available at http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/Labour_tradition_and_the_politics_of_paradox.pdf (accessed on 25 August 2014).
4. David Marquand, Review of *Speak for Britain! A New History of the Labour Party*, by Martin Pugh, *New Statesman*, 2 April 2010. Available at <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/04/working-class-labour-party> (accessed on 25 August 2014).
5. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 [orig. pub. 1944]).
6. For a lively telling of the story of Blue Labour, see Rowenna Davis, *Tangled up in Blue: Blue Labour and the Struggle for Labour's Soul* (London: Ruskin Press, 2011).
7. Leader, 'Liberalism now feels inadequate in this new age of insecurity', *New Statesman*, 27 March 2013. Available at <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2013/03/leader-liberalism-now-feels-inadequate-new-age-insecurity> (accessed on 25 August 2014).
8. Maurice Glasman, *Mail on Sunday*, 18 August 2013. Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2396382/Lord-Glasman-Ed-Miliband-REAL-Labour-leader.html> (accessed on 25 August 2014).